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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PROTESTS: NOT MUCH NEW IN OPPOSITION'S

RESPONSE TO PRESIDENT'S OFFER

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) Summary: The non-parliamentary opposition responded to the GoG's offer of dialogue on six concrete points with six proposals of its own, with a deadline of May 26 for implementation. The non-parliamentary offer is still calling for new presidential and parliamentary elections this year, but has added calls for the resignations of Interior Minister, Vano Merabishvili, Justice Minister Zurab Adeishvili and CEC Chair Levan Tarknashvili among other demands. The non-parliamentary opposition's statement also stressed that the current impasse cannot be resolved through a constructive dialogue. So far, no GoG official has commented on the counter-proposal. Street protests continued with fewer than 500 protesters in front of Parliament. Small groups rallied in front of Rustavi 2, and MoIA's special operations center. Opposition Maestro TV announced that it would expand broadcasting into western Georgia and be available in Kutaisi, Batumi, Poti, Senaki, and Zestaponi via cable. President Saakashvili issued a public statement criticizing radical street politics. The Ambassador met with Levan Gachechiladze, and then David Usupashvili (Republicans) and Kakha Shartava (National Forum) May 19 to discuss their plans. Despite the public bluster, Gachechiladze, Usupashvili, and Shartava did not appear very confident in their current position or that protests were helping their cause. Usupashvili and Shartava both privately expressing a willingness to engage with the GoG. End Summary.

12. (C) Comment: The non-parliamentary opposition's counter-proposal represents an offer likely to be quickly rejected by the GoG. Instead of moderating public demands, the counter-offer is essentially an impractical laundry list of demands to be implemented within a week. In our view, the response which rejects dialogue and sets forth maximalist demands is at odds with the relative bargaining power between the two sides, and once again represents the opposition group settling on the only thing they all can agree upon - Saakashvili's resignation. We will continue to push both sides and are at least mildly encouraged that relative hard-liners like Shartava are open to dialogue in principle. Irakli Alasania's absence from the political scene -- he is currently visiting the U.S. -- is not helping move the radical opposition to a more moderate approach. End Comment.

Response Likely a Non-Starter

13. (C) The non-parliamentary response started with the statement that the "(m)eeting between the representatives of the non-parliamentary opposition and Mikheil Saakashvili on May 11 confirmed once again that the authorities are inadequately assessing the deep political crisis in the country and therefore, it is impossible to resolve the problems through a constructive dialogue." The statement sets a deadline of May 26, Georgia's Independence Day, for the GoG to implement the demands. (Embassy Comment: The May 26 deadline was almost assuredly chosen to correspond with the non-parliamentary opposition's planned Georgian Independence Day rally to provide another pretext to criticize the GoG's failure to respond to the political

crisis. However, a one-week deadline to call for new elections and large-scale personnel changes was clearly a deliberately unreasonable timeline. End Comment.)

14. (C) The statement calls for 1) Saakashvili's resignation and early presidential elections; 2) free and fair parliamentary elections in autumn of 2009; 3) Tbilisi mayoral elections in autumn of 2009; 3) Tbilisi mayoral elections in autumn 2009; 4) constitutional changes to set an early election date; 5) a plebiscite on a new constitution in autumn 2009; 6) replacement of the Interior Minister and Minister of Justice with the opposition's agreement needed on the replacements; 7) separation of the Department for Constitutional Security from the MoIA; 8) replacement of the chairman of the Supreme Court with the opposition's agreement needed on the replacement; 9) replacement of the chairman of the Central Election Commission with the opposition's agreement needed on the replacement; 10) creation of an electoral code working group; 11) replacement of the general director of the public broadcaster and the members of the board of trustees with the opposition's agreement needed on the replacement; 12) transfer of the ownership of Imedi TV to Badri Patarkatsishvili's family; 13) transfer of the management of public channel 2 to an opposition approved group of political analysts and experts; 14) eradication of the artificial barriers for issuing broadcasting licenses.

Non-Parliamentary Opposition Meets Ambassador

15. (C) The Ambassador met May 19 with Gachechiladze, then subsequently with Usupashvili and Shartava to discuss the non-parliamentary opposition's plans. Gachechiladze offered little substance other than to push for a meeting in Brussels

TBILISI 00000937 002 OF 002

between the non-parliamentary opposition and Saakashvili -- an idea originally proposed by EU Special Envoy Peter Semneby. Gachechiladze offered no specifics other than his idea to have Javier Solana attend the meeting at least briefly. Gachechiladze then offered his assessment of the current situation saying that if the GoG did not give the non-parliamentary opposition substantial concessions, the more radical elements in the crowd would take over and potentially provoke violence. Gachechiladze said that he could not trust Saakashvili on any issue, even if he provided written public guarantees. Gachechiladze said that he would ultimately be satisfied with a compromise short of Saakashvili's resignation if there was substantial media and police reform. Gachechiladze said the non-parliamentary opposition would not unblock Rustaveli Avenue until Saakashvili had delivered substantial (but unspecified) concessions.

16. (C) Usupashvili and Shartava dismissed the GoG's proposal saying it was nothing but a cut and paste from past proposals. Usupashvili said that parliamentary elections this year were the only solution. Like Gachechiladze, Usupashvili said that if such concessions were not received, more radical elements would take over. Usupashvili and Shartava said that if the GoG did not engage in acceptable compromises, the opposition would only have the choice of blocking highways or taking a break until September. The Ambassador responded that blocking major highways would be considered a dangerous and illegal escalation. Usupashvili backed away saying he understood that the non-parliamentary opposition had a substantial image problem because of its tactics, but had little choice. He said 7 out of 10 decision makers (excluding Nino Burjanadze, Salome Zourabichvili, and Eka Beselia) were open to ending the protests and starting dialogue. Usupashvili acknowledged the wide diversity of opinion even among the 7 potentially willing to negotiate and also acknowledged the relative weakness of their bargaining position. In response to a suggestion from the Ambassador, Usupashvili and Shartava said they would be willing to meet with Speaker David Bakradze in private to discuss potential areas of agreement and compromise. Both indicated, however,

that they needed to discuss the Ambassador's suggestion among the group of non-parliamentary leaders open to compromise before fully committing.

Saakashvili Comments

17. (C) President Saakashvili commented on May 18, saying that Georgia is "leaving the politics of streets and extremism in the past." He went on to say there were responsible leaders emerging including those who "take a more responsible approach and who assess the situation more realistically." Saakashvili said that some people among the group "who think that there is no way back and for whom the major political recipe is to mess up the country and halt the economy." Saakashvili said he was serving his last presidential term and would not resign, but did leave the door open for early elections saying "(w)e should at first see whether it is possible to negotiate on a kind of election system wherein election results are recognized by all parties." He said that elections can be used for diffusing political disagreements but when they are simply used as a pretext for bringing the country to a standstill, elections are not a viable solution. Saakashvili also said that corrupt former officials and business figures were trying to regain their influence after the Rose Revolution and Oregain their influence after the Rose Revolution and responded to former President Shevardnadze's recent statements that Saakashvili should resign by saying that "(i)f someone misses Shevardnadze, they can go an visit him in Krtsanisi" (Shevardnadze's residence). He then proceeded to outline the failures of Shevardnadze's presidency. (Embassy Comment: Not surprisingly, Saakashvili's comments appear to closely echo the complaints and views about the non-parliamentary opposition we have heard in focus groups and from the public at large. End Comments.)

Maestro Expands Coverage Area

18. (C) Maestro TV announced that it would be available to viewers in Kutaisi, Batumi, Poti, Senaki, and Zestaponi through local cable television providers. The expansion means that Maestro will be available to virtually all areas of Georgia rather than just Tbilisi and the Kakheti region. It is unclear if Maestro will be permanently available or will simply be aired to correspond to singer Utsnobi's (Giorgi Gachechiladze - Levan Gachechiladze's brother) plan to organize rallies in the west and march to Tbilisi for the planned May 26 rallies. Rumors abound in Tbilisi that Nino Burjanadze is financing the expansion of Maestro.
TEFFT